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AUTHOR(S):

Fanselow, Frank

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## Indigenous and Anthropological Theories of Ethnic Conflict in Kalimantan

Frank FANSELOW

**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyses indigenous and anthropological attempts to understand several outbreaks of ethnic violence that occurred around the time of the 1998 Indonesian Reform in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo. Violence between immigrant Madurese and indigenous Dayaks had occurred regularly in the western and central provinces of Kalimantan since the intensification of the transmigration policy in the 1970s but it increased dramatically with the collapse of Suharto's New Order. Between 1997 and 2001 there were three major outbreaks of communal violence that attracted a great deal of sensationalist media reporting in part because they involved archaic forms of violence such as headhunting and cannibalism. This paper is concerned primarily with the different theories that have been put forward to explain the violence, rather than with the 'facts' of the conflict about which a number of reports have already been written. Social scientists who have worked in the area generally reduce the ethnic conflict to economic competition over resources between two marginalised groups. This interpretation of the conflict has been 'fed back' into the society by the media and is vehemently rejected by the Dayaks themselves, who have not only developed an alternative theory of the conflict but also a critique of anthropological interpretations. They interpret the conflict as a 'clash of cultures' between Madurese and Dayak traditions (*adat*) and dismiss the reduction of cultural differences to economic factors as yet another form of cultural imperialism in a long history of misrepresentation of Dayak society in which outsiders have imposed their categories of understanding on Dayak culture. They argue that the conflict can only be resolved if it is understood through the categories of Dayak culture itself and managed within the framework of conflict resolution methods available in Dayak culture.

**KEYWORDS:** anthropology, ethnic conflict, post-Suharto Indonesia, indigenous minorities

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FANSELOW is Associate Professor of Anthropology, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi. E-mail: Frank.Fanselow@zu.ac.ae

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## 1. Introduction

Outbreaks of ethnic violence between indigenous ethnic groups and transmigrants from other parts of Indonesia have regularly occurred in Kalimantan since the 1970s, but the scale and intensity of such violence escalated greatly immediately with the disintegration of Suharto's New Order. In the years after 1997 there was a series of outbreaks of ethnic violence that were at the time highly sensationalised in the national and international media because they involved instances of apparently archaic conspicuous forms of violence such as headhunting and cannibalism<sup>1</sup>. The violence occurred mainly between the indigenous inhabitants of Borneo, belonging to a multitude of different ethnic groups that are collectively known as Dayaks, and recent transmigrants from the small and densely populated island of Madura in the Java Sea.

Between 1966 and 1998 about 300,000 Madurese were resettled in Kalimantan with the largest concentrations in West and Central Kalimantan.<sup>2</sup> The most serious outbreaks of



The four provinces of Kalimantan in the Indonesian part of the island of Borneo  
(source: googlemaps)

<sup>1</sup> "Bloody Borneo", TIME (12th March 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford Analytica Weekly Column*, (15th March 2001) ([www.oxan.com](http://www.oxan.com)).

violence occurred in January–February 1997 in the Sanggau and in March–April 1999 in the Sambas regions of West Kalimantan and in February–March 2001 around Sampit in Central Kalimantan. The total death toll in these conflicts reached at least 1200 people by official counts (though some unofficial estimates put the number as high as 8000 dead) and about 163,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who live either in refugee camps in Kalimantan or have fled back to Madura. In addition to human losses, there was massive destruction of property, including the burning down of more than 6000 houses. These conflicts were among the most serious outbreaks of ethnic violence in recent Indonesian history.

## 2. The Events

In this paper I will only briefly summarise the sequence of actual events because a number of detailed factual reports based on inquiries held by various NGOs are available. Human Rights Watch Asia (HRW) has published a report on the 1997 outbreak in West Kalimantan<sup>3</sup>, and the International Crisis Group (ICG) published a report on the February–March 2001 outbreak in Central Kalimantan<sup>4</sup>. Shorter accounts have been published by the Asian Human Rights Commission (HRC)<sup>5</sup>, the Defense for Political Prisoners in Indonesia Campaign (TAPOL)<sup>6</sup>, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)<sup>7</sup>, and the British NGO Down to Earth (DTE)<sup>8</sup>. The following section briefly summarises the events as they are detailed in these reports. This will provide the necessary background for the rest of the paper in which I examine various theoretical narratives put forward by the actors themselves (i.e. the Dayak, the Madurese, the Security Forces) as well as by outside observers (mainly anthropologists and other social scientists and activists). The paper concludes by locating these theories within the dynamics of the conflict situation itself, rather than treating them as post facto theoretical formulations.

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<sup>3</sup> *Communal Violence in West Kalimantan*, Human Rights Watch, (1997) ([www.hrw.org/reports/wkali](http://www.hrw.org/reports/wkali)).

<sup>4</sup> *Communal Violence in Indonesia: Lessons from Kalimantan*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report N.18 (27th June 2001).

<sup>5</sup> *Development Inspires Violence in Central Kalimantan*, Asian Human Rights Commission—Human Rights SOLIDARITY Vol. 11, No. 4 (April 2001).

<sup>6</sup> *Deadly conflict in Central Kalimantan*, TAPOL: the Indonesia Human Rights Campaign, *Bulletin Online* 161 (March/April 2001) ([www.gn.apc.org/tapol/161nhead.htm](http://www.gn.apc.org/tapol/161nhead.htm)).

<sup>7</sup> *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: Situation Report on Central Kalimantan*. No. 1 (25th February 2001), No. 2 (1st March 2001), No. 3 (2nd March 2001).

<sup>8</sup> *Killings in West Kalimantan—Indonesia*. Down to Earth Action Alert (20 Feb. 2001).

## 2.1. West Kalimantan

At the time West Kalimantan (*Kalimantan Barat* or Kalbar) had a population of about 3 million. The two major population groups in the province are the Dayaks and the Malays, each constituting about 40% of the total population. Many of the Malays are descendents of members of indigenous groups who converted to Islam under the influence of various sultanates along the coast, such as the sultanates of Sambas and Pontianak. Although some Malays still remember their Dayak ancestry, once converted to Islam they become Malays and are no longer regarded as Dayaks. Malays are found in greater numbers on the coastal plains, whereas the Dayaks are more numerous in the interior regions. In addition to these two main groups about 13% of the population is Chinese, living mainly in urban areas, like the town of Singkawang that is predominantly Chinese. The province has one of the highest concentrations of Chinese in Indonesia which is the result of large-scale migration during the gold rush of the late 18th and early 19th centuries when this part of Borneo was one of the world's major gold producing regions. The rest of the population are a diverse range of transmigrants from other parts of Indonesia, most of whom were re-settled there during the height of the transmigration programmes in the 1970s and 1980s. These include the Madurese as well as Javanese, Bugis, Batak, Balinese and others. The Madurese constitute just under 3% of the total population of the province as a whole, but before the recent ethnic violence they constituted more than 5% of the population in the districts of Sambas and Sanggau which had the highest concentration of Madurese.

Prior to the violence in 1997, there had been at least seven violent clashes between Madurese and Dayaks in the province since the 1970s. These often started with the alleged murder or rape of a Dayak by a Madurese, which in turn led to Dayak retaliation. In all these cases the violence was quickly contained and remained localised and the number of casualties was limited (the worst such incident occurred in 1983 near Pontianak and led to the death of 12 people). This pattern changed in January 1997 when the conflict escalated to engulf a large part of the province, particularly Sambas and Sanggau Districts and left about 500 people dead and 20,000 displaced. This incident triggered off a full-scale ethnic confrontation that engulfed wide areas of West Kalimantan when Dayaks and Madurese attacked each other's settlements and set up roadblocks hunting down each other. After about three weeks of violence 500 people were left dead, although unofficial estimates put the number as high as 3000.

A second episode of communal violence occurred in March and April 1999 further north from Pontianak in Sambas, the seat of a pre-colonial Malay sultanate. The clashes left 200 dead and about 35,000 Madurese displaced, most of whom found safety in refugee camps in Pontianak. In October 2000 and in July 2001 smaller outbreaks of violence occurred in Pontianak between Madurese IDPs and local Malays and Dayaks.

## 2. 2. Central Kalimantan

The province of Central Kalimantan (*Kalimantan Tengah* or Kalteng) was established in 1957 by dividing the previous province of South Kalimantan (*Kalimantan Selatan* or Kalsel) into an overwhelmingly Muslim southern part around the capital of the pre-colonial sultanate of Banjarmasin and a separate predominantly Dayak province of Central Kalimantan. The division occurred in response to a brief Dayak insurrection against Banjar Malay dominance. Central Kalimantan is one of the least developed and most sparsely populated provinces of Indonesia but a major logging centre. Since the establishment of Central Kalimantan the demographic composition of the province has been substantially changed by informal migration from South Kalimantan and formal transmigration from Java, Madura and Bali. At the time of the violence only about 60% of the population of the province's 1.8 million population were Dayaks. Of these about two thirds are Muslims and the rest are either Christian or follow 'traditional' Dayak religion. The other 40% of the province's population was made up of immigrants, most of them Banjar Malays and about 6–7% percent Madurese. Like in West Kalimantan, the Dayaks are found more in the interior upriver parts of the province. The (trans)migrants live mostly in urban areas, particularly in Sampit, Pangkalanbun and the provincial capital of Palangkaraya. Before the recent violence, the highest concentration of Madurese was found in the logging town of Sampit, where they made up about 60% of the population compared to only 10% Dayak.

As was the case in West Kalimantan, there is a long history of violent incidents between Dayak and Madurese in Central Kalimantan involving at least 15 incidents since 1982. But during the authoritarian 'New Order' regime these remained localized and limited. This changed at the beginning of 2001 when ethnic violence occurred over wide areas and left hundreds dead and led to a mass exodus of Madurese from the province. Surviving Madurese fled to the provincial capital Palangkaraya or north to the town of Pangkalanbun, near the border with West Kalimantan, from where many were evacuated by ship to Madura so that by mid-April 108,000 refugees had already left the province. According to official figures about 500 people were killed, although unofficial estimates put the number as high as 3000. Except for those in the town of Pangkalanbun, almost all Madurese fled from Central Kalimantan. Local Dayak leaders in the town had set a deadline for Madurese to leave Pangkalanbun, but the government claimed that they would not allow this forced expulsion. Nevertheless of the 45,000 Madurese in the town only 25,000 remained, the last remaining concentration of Madurese in Central Kalimantan.

## 3. The Narratives

### 3. 1. Rising Fundamentalism: Another Muslim-Christian Conflict?

Initial reports of the violence in Kalimantan in the Indonesian media tended to represent

them as another case of religious conflict between Muslims and Christians. The violence in Central Kalimantan in March 1999 occurred at a time when Muslim-Christian conflicts had just started in Ambon (Malaku) in January 1999 and in Poso (Sulawesi) in December 1998, April–June 2000, and in November–December 2001. The initial reaction of the national media was to contextualise the violence in West Kalimantan in early 1997 as essentially another religious conflict threatening national unity, this time between Christian Dayaks and Muslim Madurese<sup>9</sup>. This interpretation was made plausible by the fact that the Madurese have a long-standing reputation of being devout Muslims and are well known for their long tradition of religious scholarship<sup>10</sup>, whereas many Dayaks (the exact numbers are uncertain) have been converted to Christianity by missionaries since the late 19th century. The interpretation seemed to be further confirmed by attacks on a Catholic church in Sanggau Ledo and on a Christian NGO school hostel in which two girls were stabbed that started the violence in 1997, and the burning down of a mosque and several *suraus* (prayer rooms) used by Madurese.

But the religious narrative was quickly disputed by both sides involved in the conflict. Following the 1997 violence in West Kalimantan local Muslim leaders on both sides issued a joint statement denying that religious factors were behind the violence<sup>11</sup>. Dayak leaders in particular denied that their hostility towards the Madurese was due to religious differences and insisted that this was an ethnic conflict. They pointed out that in Sambas the violence in March 1999 did not originally start between Madurese and Dayaks but between Madurese and Malays, who are also Muslims. It was only once the violence had started that the Dayaks joined the Malays against the Madurese. Indeed, even the local Chinese were reported to have supported the Dayaks and Malays.

The ethnic situation is rather different in Central Kalimantan. In contrast to West Kalimantan, where conversion to Islam implies a change of ethnic identity to Malay, here a large proportion of the population are Muslim Dayaks, a designation that would be an oxymoron in West Kalimantan where conversion to Islam leads to assimilation into the Malay ethnicity. The reason for this difference in usage of the terms lies in the long historical antagonisms between Dayaks and Malays in the southern part of Kalimantan. South Kalimantan was the centre of the powerful pre-colonial sultanate of Banjarmasin and was politically and economically dominated by Banjar Malays. Central Kalimantan came into existence in 1957 as a predominantly Dayak province as the result of a division in 1957 of the province of South Kalimantan which was the result of a Dayak revolt against Banjar Malay domination. Dayak converts to Islam therefore did not adopt a Malay identity but remained

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<sup>9</sup> *Down To Earth: Action Alert*, (20th February 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Iik Ariffin Mansurnoor. *Islam in an Indonesian World: Ulama of Madura*. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> *Down To Earth: Action Alert*, (20th February 1997).

(Muslim) Dayaks. Indeed some of the most outspoken Dayak leaders, including K.M. Usop, a philosophy professor and former Rector of Palangkaraya University, who was arrested (and released) on charges of incitement of anti-Madurese violence, are Muslims.

This religious narrative has to be placed in the wider context of a secular nationalist narrative at the time of a nation under threat from rising religious tensions. It contextualised the events in Kalimantan by fitting them into a wider picture of rising religious divisions threatening the unity of the nation that needed a powerful government (i.e. the Suharto government) and its strong arm (i.e. the security forces) to avert disintegration. Raising the spectre of divisive religious divisions in post-Suharto era reinforced the secular nationalist narrative of the national elite.

### 3. 2. Conspiracy Theories

Not only was the religious narrative rejected by Dayak and Madurese leaders, but it was discredited as a conspiracy theory used by the old “New Order” deep state to manipulate ethnic conflict for its own political purposes. Suspicions that the violence was the result of political manipulation from the centre gained wide currency locally. It should be remembered that the conflicts occurred during a period of rapid political change in Indonesia and that various political forces both at the national and provincial level were seeking to position themselves for the future as the New Order was breaking up and a post-Suharto political system was in the process of emerging.

While both Dayaks and Madurese held deep suspicions that the violence was deliberately allowed to go out of control by the security forces, the security forces in turn blamed their reduced powers and limited resources that stretched their ability to control such sudden massive unrest. There can be little doubt that as opposition to the involvement of the armed forces in politics grew at the national level, previously suppressed communal conflicts in various parts of the country emerged into the open. But at the same time the security forces themselves were widely accused of having a hand in creating instability in order to create a climate of insecurity in which the government would have to depend on them to re-establish order. The March 1999 violence in Sambas, for example, came at a time when the government of President Abdul Rahman Wahid was trying to restrict the role of the armed forces (TNI) to external defence and leave the police (POLRI) in charge of internal security. The military used the violence in West Kalimantan and in Maluku as a justification for the expansion of Military Command Regions (Kodams), a system of military administration reaching down to the village level. In the case of Central Kalimantan, a couple of months before the eruption of violence, the former head of Indonesian intelligence agency, General Zen Maulani (who himself hails from South Kalimantan), visited the province and reportedly told the press that intelligence agencies had uncovered a plot for the province to secede from Indonesia and to declare a separate state of Borneo with the Sultan of Brunei as head of state and himself



as prime minister. Such “revelations” gained little credence and were instead suspected to be a ploy to destabilize the situation by raising fears among transmigrants of an impending Dayak take-over and a subsequent secession, which only the military could prevent.

Whatever the truth behind these conspiracy theories may be, the fact that they gained credibility among actors in the conflict is an indication of the lack of confidence among all both Dayaks and Madurese in the intentions and effectiveness of the security forces. Indeed each side suspected the security forces to be partial to the other. In the March 1999 violence in Sambas the Madurese suspected that the military was forewarned of the attacks on them and had trucks ready to move them out and police officers profited by buying the property of fleeing Madurese very cheaply. The same happened in the March 2001 violence in Sampit, where police and military were reported to be demanding money from Madurese refugees before allowing them to board ships to flee. In Pangkalanbun there was even an exchange of fire between police and army over the collection of such monies from refugees. The Dayaks, on the other hand, suspected the police to side with the Madurese. For example, Madurese criminals who had attacked or stole from Dayaks were widely believed to be allowed by the police to escape to Madura, which was one of the reasons given by Dayaks for taking justice into their own hands. The Dayak also complain that various important officials, such as the head of police of Central Kalimantan, were (at least partly) Madurese. Both sides also accused the security forces of having supplied guns to the other side.

While such conspiracy theories may explain how outside political actors exploit local ethnic antagonisms to their own advantage, they do not explain the root causes of the hostility between Dayak and Madurese. Even proponents of such conspiracy theories acknowledged that the security forces did not instigate the violence themselves, but that once the rioters realized that—unlike in the past—the security forces made little effort to contain the violence, it began to escalate rapidly. In other words, once the violence had started by dynamics of its own, the security forces recognized that it served their interests and therefore deliberately let it spin out of control in order to create an impression of ineffectiveness of the government and the need for security forces to assume a greater political role in maintaining internal order and national unity.

Such instrumentalist explanations also underlie political science and anthropological theories of ethnic conflict that view such conflicts as the result of competition between political elites that seek to manipulate ethnic identities to advance their own political interests either by mobilizing support for themselves or by creating disunity and dividing support for their opponents. Peluso and Hoban<sup>12</sup>, for example, point to the precedent of the anti-Chinese violence of the 1960s, which is now generally acknowledged to have been instigated by the military, and asks why the anti-Madurese violence of the 1990s was deliberately “allowed to explode out of control with no apparent attempt at resolution or prevention”.

The security forces, on the other hand, countered accusations of exploiting the conflict

for their own advantage by claiming that they were unable to control the conflict because their resources were stretched and they had reduced powers thus blaming the political leadership of the groups for the conflict. Indeed all the three major outbreaks of violence occurred around election times: the February 1997 clashes occurred during the campaign for the May national election, the March–April violence in Sambas preceded the June 1999 national election, and the March 2001 conflict in Sampit occurred after the elections for a new provincial governor and the security forces blamed competing political party leaders for instigating the riots during election time. Dayak leaders were suspected of whipping up anti-Madurese feelings to mobilize Dayak electoral support. The violence started with a minor incident at a concert organized as part of an election campaign by the ruling GOLKAR party in Sanggau Ledo on 6th December 1996. A young Dayak man saw two Madurese boys harassing a Dayak girl, and when they did not heed his warnings to stop, he knocked their heads together. Later in the month at another concert the two Madurese recognized the same Dayak man and with a group of other Madurese, attacked him. Rumours spread that he had died and several days of violence and counter-violence occurred in which about 20 people died before the security forces were able to contain the violence just before Ramadan. But after Ramadan the Madurese retaliated by attacking buildings belonging to a Christian Dayak NGO, including a school hostel where two girls were stabbed.

In Central Kalimantan the province's most prominent Dayak leader K.M. Usop, an Indian-trained retired philosophy professor and former rector of Palangkaraya University, was arrested on charges of instigating the violence. He had just lost the election for the provincial governorship and two of his associates, who were leading members of a NGO which he headed, subsequently lost their positions in a reorganization of the provincial government. These two were accused by the police of paying a group of Dayaks 20 million rupiah to kill the five Madurese whose murder set off the Madurese 'take-over' of Sampit. The alleged motive behind stirring up unrest was to destabilise the political situation by causing embarrassment to the incoming provincial administration.

### 3. 3. Scapegoat Theories

A different set of narratives reduces the violence to an economic conflict for scarce resources between poor Dayaks and poor Madurese. Dove<sup>13</sup>, for example, an anthropologist with long research experience in West Kalimantan writes about the violence in 1997 that

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<sup>12</sup> Peluso, Nancy Lee & Rosemary Hoban. "Myths of Headhunters", *San Francisco Chronicle* (13th March 2001). See also: Nancy Peluso. "Territorializing Ethnicity through Violence: The Case of West Kalimantan", Paper presented at the workshop on 'Violent Conflict in Indonesia', University of Melbourne, 6–7 July 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Dove, Michael. "Dayak Anger Ignored", *Inside Indonesia* No. 51, July, 1997. pp. 13–14.

"The recent so-called 'ethnic conflicts' between Dayak and Madurese in West Kalimantan are a classic example of economic tensions manifested as ethnic tensions." Similarly, Lucia Cargill, an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in Central Kalimantan, described the March 2001 conflict in a contribution to the Borneo Research Council Discussion Group as "a result of poor people fighting over scarce resources."<sup>14</sup> Writing from a strictly Marxist perspective, Peter Symonds sees "the real reasons for the breakup of traditional Dayak society lie in government policy and the operation of the profit system.... Dayaks were increasingly forced to live on the edge of the towns and came into conflict with the Madurese settlers, who were often as poor as themselves, over government jobs and small business... the Madurese in Kalimantan were made scapegoats for the lack of jobs and rising levels of poverty."<sup>15</sup>

Such Marxist-inspired explanations see the ultimate causes of the conflict in the development policies of the Suharto's New Order, particularly land development and transmigration policies. The 'development' of natural resources through logging, plantations and mining has deprived the Dayaks of land to practise shifting cultivation and indeed their traditional way of life, which is inextricably tied up with the forest materially and spiritually. At the same time, the transmigration policy moved people from overcrowded parts of the country, such as Java and Madura, to low density areas like Kalimantan to work in plantations and new agricultural projects, many of which were ill-planned and later abandoned pushing many transmigrants into the informal urban sector. As a result the Dayaks were left marginalized with not enough land to practice their traditional way of life, and not enough jobs to participate fully in the 'modern' way of life. Dayaks and Madurese therefore compete for the little land and few jobs that are available for those at the bottom of society.

The ethnic conflict in Kalimantan put anthropologists and activists working with the Dayaks in a difficult moral situation. On the one hand, it is one of the main purposes of anthropology to deconstruct notions of 'primitiveness' and 'savagery' but, on the other hand, in this case the very societies whose complexity and sophistication anthropologists sought to convey in their work, seemed to confirm the worst misconceptions of "savage" cannibals and headhunters.

How should anthropologists react when "their" people stand accused of perpetrating massacres and ethnic cleansing? How should an American anthropologist (and most anthropologists who have worked in Kalimantan are American) react to TIME magazine's (March 12, 2001) cover photograph of a Dayak holding a weapon and two beheaded bodies lying on the road behind him above the headline "Bloody Borneo: A massacre and cannibalism strike

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<sup>14</sup> Lucia Cargill. Borneo Research Council Discussion Group ([www.sarawak.com.my/org/BRC](http://www.sarawak.com.my/org/BRC)) (28th February 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Symonds, Peter. "Racial Killings in Borneo: a symptom of deep-seated social tensions", *World Socialist Website* ([wsws.org](http://wsws.org)).

at the heart of Indonesia”? The article went on to describe the events:

Indonesia's central Kalimantan province reverted to the law of the jungle when indigenous Dayaks, celebrated in tourism brochures for their tribal customs and picturesque, dormitory-style long-houses, went on a coordinated spree of murder against the province's migrant community from the arid island of Madura. And concepts like rule of law began to seem completely irrelevant when the Dayaks, following their traditional custom, began eating the body parts of their victims to gain spiritual strength.

"They cut off their heads and put them in sacks. And then they sliced them open and took out their hearts, and then..." Halerin pinches his fingers together and motions toward his mouth, the Indonesian gesture for eating. "The children and women were first. I even saw a baby being chopped. Maybe one month old at the most."

"They cut off their heads and then cut them up and took them away to eat. There were a lot of Madurese in Sanggau. Now 95% of us are dead."

"Perhaps there's no other explanation than the simple word ...: evil."

Most anthropologists who have done research in Kalimantan have worked among Dayak communities and feel empathy for the plight of the Dayak and the destruction of their culture. But the fact that the same people appear in the global media as perpetrators of horrific cruelties leaves them in a moral dilemma. This could be felt in the internet discussion group of the Borneo Research Council, where for a while after the violence began there was no mention of it until one member pointed out that scholars of Borneo should really have something to say about the violence. Reactions were somewhat muted and generally defensive of the Dayaks as victims, outright condemnations were reserved for government policies and the mass media, whose sensationalist coverage was blamed for further inflaming the violence. Cargill, an anthropologist with long experience in Central Kalimantan, protested to CNN and BBC about the use of the term "ethnic cleaning" in relation to the Dayak campaign to evict the Madurese from Kalimantan, arguing that what happened in Kalimantan could not be compared to the organized killing and expulsion of ethnic minorities in the former Yugoslavia.

### 3. 4. Indigenous Theories

The Dayaks and Madurese were well aware of the coverage of the conflict in the national and even international media and both the Dayak and Madurese intelligentsia, including sociologists and anthropologists, became involved in the discussions and began contesting some of the theoretical narratives of outside observers. Structural explanations in particular, such as Marxist position which reduces the conflict to economic competition, were widely rejected by both Dayaks and Madurese. Without completely denying the importance of political and economic factors, they saw cultural differences as more important.

### 3. 4. 1. Envy Theory

In contrast to structural explanations that place both the Madurese and Dayaks together at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in competition for scarce resources with each other, the Madurese themselves proudly content that they have been economically more successful than the Dayaks and have thus become the victims of Dayak envy. They attribute their relative economic success to cultural differences: their self-representation seems to come straight out of Weber's 'Protestant Ethic': religious devotion, hard work and regular saving are believed to define the Madurese 'character'. The Madurese sociologist Abdul Latief Wiyata, for example, characterised them in the following terms: "The Madurese are hard workers and have a strong grip on old traditions that are rich in Islamic teachings"<sup>16</sup>. Prominent Madurese community leader and businessman in Pontianak, Haji Sulaiman, who headed the West Kalimantan Chamber of Commerce, was reported in a newspaper interview claiming that "there's also social envy. Madurese live better, we're hard-working. Say there's unproductive land; Malays neglect it, but the Madurese take it over and make it productive. They also say Madurese are stingy. Well, we save and in the end, we can buy nice houses, wear gold, and go on hajj."<sup>17</sup> Their character is believed to have been shaped by their life in Madura, an overpopulated and arid island where life was hard. The struggle for survival under harsh conditions shaped a character of hard work effort, self-discipline and competitiveness that gave them an advantage over the Dayaks.

In the Madurese conception, the Dayaks and Malays are cast as the very opposite of themselves, namely as the 'lazy natives'. Dayak lack self-discipline and are socially easy-going and religiously undistinguished if they are Muslim, and worse if they are not. Again there is a corresponding 'environmental' explanation for these characteristics: in contrast to infertile and overcrowded Madura, the Dayak way of life developed on the sparsely populated and the (once) luscious Bornean jungles. Of course both these ethnic stereotypes have a long history that goes back to colonial representations of natives.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. 4. 2. Clash of Cultures

In Dayak narratives cultural differences also overshadow structural factors. The Dayaks tend to view the Madurese as prone to violence; this is symbolised by the term *carok* which is central to Madurese culture - at least that is the way the Dayak see it. In the most literal sense the term *carok* refers to a small knife reputedly carried by Madurese men which is thus a material symbol of the Madurese aggressive nature. More generally *carok* refers to the way

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<sup>16</sup> "A glimpse of the Madurese and Dayak in Kalimantan", *Jakarta Post* (6th August 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, *Globe* (25th April 1999).

<sup>18</sup> de Jonge, Huub. "Stereotypes of the Madurese" in: Kees van Dijk, Huub de Jonge, Elly Townen-Bouwsmma. *Across Madura Strait: The Dynamics of Insular Society*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1995. Syed Hussain Alatas. *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. London: Frank Cass, 1977.

inter-personal relations are handled and disputes are settled in Madurese culture by recourse to actual or threatened use of violence and an emphasis on defending one's honour and competitive masculinity.<sup>19</sup> In the context of Dayak culture, *carok* gives the Madurese an anti-social 'ethnic character', i.e. as aggressive and prone to violence. As is not uncommon in these kinds of stereotypes, the list of anti-social characteristics even includes physical attributes, like smell. During the violence, Dayaks setting up roadblocks were said to have recognized their Madurese victims by their smell. Like the Madurese stereotype of the Dayaks as lazy natives, so the latter's stereotype of the Madurese has a long history and is rooted in colonial construction of the colonized subjects. This stereotype is very pervasive: not only does it have a long history, but it is also widely shared by different ethnic groups in Kalimantan and indeed is common elsewhere in Indonesia and therefore seems to create a shared understanding. Its pervasiveness reinforces its plausibility.

Dayaks contrast the putative aggressive competitiveness of the Madurese with the emphasis on the maintenance of order and harmony in Dayak culture. Definitive of Dayak cultures is their system of customary laws (*adat*), which is both an unwritten constitution of their society as well as their sacred unwritten 'scripture': it not only defines relationships among humans but also the relationship between humans and the natural and supernatural worlds. The particular rules of *adat* may vary from community to community, but the notion that it constitutes an ordered social and natural universe is shared by all of them.

However, *adat* is not only a matter of governing internal relations within Dayak society and between the society and its environment and the universe, but it has become a symbol of Dayak identity in a wider rapidly evolving socio-political landscape. At a time when most aspects of Dayak society have effectively ceased to exist or been devalued and marginalized, *adat* serves as a symbol of 'Dayakness'. Their traditional subsistence mode of shifting cultivation has been declared as environmentally destructive and economically inefficient and legislation has opened up their land for 'development' through logging and plantations. Their longhouses came under suspicion as communist collectives after the 1967 anticommunist purges and have disappeared from West and Central Kalimantan. Their traditional political organisation has been replaced by a uniform national village administrative system derived from the Javanese system of village administration. Their religion was denigrated first by Christian missionaries and then by the Indonesian state, which at first refused to recognize it as a religion, and regarded its followers as communist atheists, and then in 1980 declared it as Kaharingan, a form of Hinduism. Like many indigenous societies elsewhere, little remains of Dayak society as a functioning socio-economic system, except their culture,

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, Glenn. "Carok Violence in Madura", paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, Nov. 1996. (quoted in Human Rights Watch Report: *Communal Violence in West Kalimantan*).

i.e. languages, mythologies, rituals and customs. These are the last line of defense that seems to separate their culture from oblivion.

For the Dayaks the problem with the Madurese is rooted in the latter's refusal to abide by *adat*. Not only do they violate the *adat* laws, which would in principle be a matter involving only the offender and the victim (i.e. a 'civil' matter), but they refuse to accept the regime of sanctions and procedures required by *adat* to re-establish ordered social relations, which makes it a much more profound offense that involves the Dayaks as a collectivity. Although murder, rape or theft are serious violation of *adat*, the disturbance of order they cause can be corrected through the performance of prescribed social and ritual procedures. But refusal to submit to these procedures and sanctions places the offender outside the ordered social universe that is defined by *adat*. Behind every single instance of communal violence, the Dayak recount a long history of violations of *adat* by Madurese, such as murder or rape, and a subsequent refusal to follow the prescribed *adat* procedures of restitution.

The Madurese not only refuse to recognize sacred Dayak *adat*, they are also believed to escape the operation of the state's law. The histories of communal violence recounted by the Dayak are full of cases in which Madurese criminals allegedly with the collusion of the police managed to escape formal justice. From the Dayak point of view the Madurese therefore place themselves outside any ordered social universe, be it defined by traditional *adat* or state law. This distinguishes the Madurese from other migrant communities: for example, in the 1967 anti-Chinese violence, when several Dayak leaders were killed in the most brutal fashion by the military, which spread the rumour that they had been killed by Chinese guerillas, the Chinese community made ritual compensation payments to the Dayak to settle the dispute even though they were not guilty.<sup>20</sup>

For the Dayak *adat* and *carok* are the symbols of a clash of cultures that hold opposing values and can therefore not co-exist in the same society. Because of constant violations of *adat* by the Madurese, the Dayak say they had no choice but to fight a war and expel the Madurese. For them fighting the Madurese was not a matter of choice, but a requirement of *adat*. It is more than mere self-defence by those who have been attacked, because it is motivated by a sense of outrage at the violation of Dayak culture. Not to uphold *adat* would mean the collapse of all order. A report by Human Rights Watch puts it this way "The bloody conflict ... came about as the need for the Dayak to fulfill the obligations and demands of the *adat*, or indigenous laws. Failure to do so would have resulted in great misfortune being experienced by the whole of Dayak community."<sup>21</sup> The theme of being forced rather than deciding to fight repeats itself in various ways in Dayak accounts of the violence. Thus

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<sup>20</sup> *Communal Violence in West Kalimantan*, Human Rights Watch (1997). ([www.hrw.org/reports/wkali](http://www.hrw.org/reports/wkali))

<sup>21</sup> "The Role of *Adat* in the Dayak & Madurese War", *Kalimantan Review*, Vol. 2 (November 1999).



many Dayak warriors said they did not understand what they were doing and why they were doing it, and believed themselves—and are widely believed by other Dayak—to have been possessed by spirits during the fighting. There were also reports that the swords (*mandau*) used for decapitating the enemies were not held by the Dayak fighters themselves, but flew out of their hands on their own towards the victims.

The Dayaks define the conflict with the Madurese as a ‘war’, that is a situation where all other means of conflict resolution have failed and rules that normally regulate social life no longer apply. If *adat* defines society, then Madurese violations of *adat* and their rejection of conflict resolution procedures prescribed by *adat*, is a declaration of war. The violence was therefore symbolically cast in the forms of traditional Dayak war. The fighting was usually preceded by the handing around of the ‘red bowl’, a traditional Dayak ritual of war, and the fighters wore red headbands as a symbol of warriors. The violence itself took many forms, much of it the ordinary ugly violence of shootings, stabbings and arson, but there were also acts of violence that resurrected memories of traditional tribal wars involving headhunting (which was outlawed by the Dutch a century earlier) and cannibalism. “Headhunting in itself is not bad” as one Dayak school teacher and NGO activist in Pontianak told me in June 2001, “it is just like shooting down a warplane that attacks your country.”

### 3. 5. The Dayak critiques of anthropology theories

Dayak intellectual and political leaders have not only developed their own clash of cultures theory but also critiques of alternative theories. They generally seek to refute any explanation that reduces their antagonism to the Madurese to economic terms pointing to a number of facts: firstly, the economically most successful community are the Chinese, but relations between Dayak and Chinese have been good (with the exception of the 1967 conflict that is now generally attributed by historians to manipulation by the army). The Dayak writer Riska Orpa Sari summarises the argument: “For years, others have accused the Dayaks of envy. But if we envied people for living a better life, we would envy the Chinese, Malaysians, Javanese or Balinese who also live among us.”<sup>22</sup> Secondly, the Madurese are only one of the transmigrant communities in Kalimantan besides Javanese, Batak, Minangkabau, Bugis and Balinese as well as a sizeable community of Banjarese from South Kalimantan in Central Kalimantan. But there have been no comparable conflicts with the other communities, and in some cases these communities are said to have sided with the Dayaks against the Madurese. In the Sambas violence, for example, Malays, Bugis and even Chinese all sided with the Dayaks against the Madurese. The Dayak therefore argue that this is not just a conflict between Dayaks and Madurese, but a conflict between the Madurese, on the one hand, and all other communities, both indigenous and transmigrant, on the other hand.

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<sup>22</sup> Riska Orpa Sari. “Leave us in Peace”, *Globe and Mail* (9th March 2001).



The Dayak rejection of economic conflict theories is more than just a question of the 'facts' contradicting a theory. During the Central Kalimantan People's Congress which was held in Palangkaraya in June 2001 following the violence, the suggestion by an Indonesian sociologist that the root of the problem was competition for scarce resources received a very hostile reception from an audience representing Dayak communities from all over Kalimantan. In a more academic context, Dove's (1997) analysis of the Sambas conflict as a classic example of economic competition manifesting itself as ethnic tensions and published in the monthly magazine 'Indonesia Today' became the subject of a sharp critique by Dayak intellectuals working for the Institute of Dayakology in Pontianak in a paper<sup>23</sup> presented at the INFID conference in Bonn, Germany held in 1998 and subsequently published in Institute of Dayakology's magazine *Kalimantan Review*: "Whilst the marginalisation of the Dayak through the development and political process is a factor that cannot be overlooked, it is interesting to note that you never hear a Dayak talk about the conflict in those terms."

This remarkable paper accuses "experts and advocates" of committing the arch sin of anthropology, namely that of ignoring the "native point of view". It argues that "an axiom of anthropology" had thereby been violated, namely the idea "that people perceive the world in widely differing ways and that they also behave on the basis of these perceptions." Instead of taking the people's (i.e. Dayak) perception into account, these explanations are based on the "perspective of 'experts' and 'advocates', which [are] sometimes ungrounded, and far from the everyday reality as felt by the people." It goes on to argue that this is yet another example in a long history of "the subjectification of the Dayak through discourses external to the Dayak themselves [which] is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, it is the history of colonialism, past and present."

Against rationalist and instrumentalist theories of the conflict in terms of competition for political and economic resources, it calls for putting the native point of view at the centre, i.e. to look at the conflict through the categories of Dayak culture instead of imposing universalist assumptions about the nature of conflicts. But surprisingly it then goes on to assert the impossibility to communicate this "native point of view" to outsiders, be they sympathetic anthropologists, hostile Madurese or the supposedly neutral government. Here the "axiom of anthropology that people perceive the world in widely differing ways and that they behave on the basis of these perceptions" is turned against anthropology (if we define it as the interpretation of culture) because "these perceptions may represent insuperable barriers to understanding":

Just how does one explain to outsiders, particularly those of a liberal rationalist background,

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<sup>23</sup> Institute of Dayakology Research and Development. "The Role of Adat in the Dayak & Madurese War", *Kalimantan Review* Vol. 2 (November 1999), 39–44.

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about facts that do not fit the usual styles and forms of language, the categories of representation, and the binary oppositions that establish conceptual order? How does one explain about what is beyond time and space, inside and outside, dead and alive, good and evil, without it being reduced to “black magic”, as opposed to the “white” variety of accepted mainstream religions, or the “primitive”, as opposed to “civilized”? Reports have until now presumed the presence of rational thought, people acting with intent and logic in an irrational manner, and on the basis of those actions being labeled as “headhunters” and “cannibals”.<sup>24</sup>

Of course at one level such radical cultural relativism can be seen as a self-serving excuse for the shocking acts of violence committed by some Dayaks. By removing headhunting and cannibalism from a common moral universe and contextualising them in a separate Dayak cultural universe, such practices are made incomprehensible to outsiders and any attempt to explain or judge them would then disqualify itself as again “the subjectification of the Dayak through discourses external to the Dayak themselves”.

The irony of the argument is of course that this anthropologically sophisticated assertion of the futility of communicating the “native point of view” gets its point across very effectively. But that is really besides the point here: what this document really does is that it gives intellectual expression to a profound sense of alienation among the Dayak generally, a sense that their point of view is never taken seriously—whether by sympathetic anthropologists (‘experts’), well-meaning NGOs (‘advocates’), concerned (in the dual sense of the word) government agencies, or the media in search of a sensational story. It bears testimony to a deep sense of not being understood by others because these others do not really want to understand, and therefore it becomes futile to try to communicate with them and to participate in the development of a common narrative. Conspicuous and archaic forms of violence, such as ‘headhunting’ and ‘cannibalism’, then become a means of communicating their alienation where other forms of communication have failed.

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<sup>24</sup> Institute of Dayakology Research and Development. “The Role of Adat in the Dayak & Madurese War”, *Kalimantan Review* Vol. 2 (November 1999), 39–44.

